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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of behavior concepts that together provide the outline of a possible developmental theory of prosocial motivation. These concepts, based on human role-taking capacities, include empathic distress, sympathetic distress, personal guilt, and existential guild. At first, a child cannot discriminate between himself and others in emphatic distress. Then he learns to discriminate and can feel sympathy for others through four developmental stages: (1) the child's assumption of the other's feelings are first based on the projection of his own feelings, even though his objective is to relieve the other's distress; (2) the child becomes aware that the other's perspective is different from his own, and guesses what his feedback should be, (3) the child synthesizes his empathic distress reaction to the other's feelings in a situation with a cognitive construction of the other's general misfortune, and (4) the child can comprehend the plight of entire groups of people. The concept of personal guilt is described as a synthesis of sympathetic distress and an awareness of being the cause of the other's distress. Existential guilt, which is the last concept, is described as coming from a realization that a person is enjoying what others cannot enjoy, or is not suffering what others suffer. Anecdotal examples of each prosocial behavior concept are given. (SET)

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TOWARD A DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY OF PROSOCIAL MOTIVATION

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TOWARD A DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY OF PROSOCIAL MOTIVATION

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I would like to present some notions about the development of prosocial motives that I have been working on for some time but only recently put together into some semblance of a coherent scheme.

First, a few words about the prevailing view in psychology; which has long been that prosocial behaviors are not intrinsically motivated. They either derive from selfish motives -- as in Anna Freud's view that altruism is a reaction formation against hostility -- or they are produced by reinforcement, like any other behavior. Even motivation theorists like Maslow, who deal with higher motives such as self-fulfillment, either ignore or give lip service to the prosocial. What could be less prosocial or altruistic than the continued search for peak experiences.

My assumption is that in man's evolution there has been selection for prosocial as well as individual motivation, since at least in the early periods of human existence some form of cooperative activity was necessary for survival. There is every reason to assume, therefore, that prosocial motives are as likely to be intrinsic as individual or selfish motives, however fragile they may appear to be in our highly individualistic society. And what I am trying to do is answer the question: if intrinsic prosocial motives do exist what are they like and how do they develop in the individual? My presentation will consist of a summary of several concepts that together provide the outline of a possible developmental theory of prosocial motivation. These concepts, which all rest ultimately on the human capacity to take the other's role, are: empathic distress; sympathetic distress; personal guilt; and existential guilt. My discussion will be sprinkled with anecdotal data, not as evidence but to clarify and illustrate the concepts in such a way as to suggest possible avenues for operationalizing them.

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The first, empathic distress, is by no means a new concept, nor is the process by which it is acquired a complex one. The child cuts himself, feels the pain, cries. Later on he sees another child cut himself and cry. The sight of the blood, the sound of the cry, or any distress cue from the other child associated with his own prior experience of pain, can now elicit the unpleasant affect that was initially a part of that experience. This affective response to the distress cue is the empathic distress.

Even the very young child has the necessary neural capacity for this response, and he has it long before developing a sense of self or a sense of the other. As a result of this lack of self-other differentiation it is unclear to him who is experiencing the distress and he will often behave as though he were experiencing it. A graduate student recently described two incidents with his young son, which are beautifully illustrative. In one, the father felt depressed and looked downcast. The boy, who was 14 months at the time, noticed this and his immediate response was to move quickly to his mother to be comforted. In another, the boy, now 18 months old, was hitting his father, at first playfully but with increasing ferocity. It began to hurt and the father doubled up in mock pain. The child immediately stopped the hitting, doubled up, put his thumb in his mouth, and put his head in his father's lap -- exactly the pattern used when he is experiencing pain.

Developmentally this is obviously a primitive response. We may use the word empathy but the child is obviously not putting himself in the other's place. His response is rather a passive and involuntary one, based on the "pull" of the cues emitted by the victim which are perceptually similar to cues associated with his own past painful experiences. We may also note that resulting behavior appears to be <u>hedonistically</u> motivated, that is, designed to reduce the child's own distress rather than distress in the other. Nevertheless, it is relevant to prosocial motivation since the child's distress is contingent not on his own, but someone else's actual painful experience.

The first important developmental advance, for our purposes, occurs when the child is able to distinguish between self and other. When confronted with another person in pain he continues to have the empathic distress reaction but because of this new cognitive capacity, he will know that it is the other person, and not he who is experiencing the actual distress. The synthesis of empathic distress with the recognition that the other is actually experiencing the discomfort constitutes what I will call sympathetic distress. The child now feels "sympathy for" rather than "empathy with" the victim -- a reciprocal rather than a parallel affective response. There are four levels of sympathetic distress, each dependent on further advances in the child's cognitive capacity.

At the first level, although the child has acquired a sense of the other he as yet fails to distinguish between the inner states (thoughts, perceptions, feelings) of the other, and of himself. Thus while he knows the other person is the victim his assumptions about the other's feelings are based on sheer projection of his own feelings. This is evidenced in his efforts to relieve the other's distress, as illustrated again with the child of a student. A boy aged 19 months is playing in the same room as another child the same age. The other child starts to cry. The boy brings his own mother to the child, instead of the latter's mother who is also present. In another incident several weeks later, the same boy gives up his beloved Teddy to another child who is crying because his parents have left him for several days. This incident is particularly interesting because the boy's parents reminded him that he would miss his Teddy if he gave it away. He nevertheless insisted -- as if the sympathetic distress he was experiencing was greater than the anticipated unpleasantness of not having the doll, which is possibly indicative of the strong motivational potential of sympathetic distress.

In many ways, this first level of sympathetic distress is as primitive as the empathic distress described earlier -- a passive involuntary response to cues perceptually similar to those associated with his own past painful experiences. The overt response, however, appears to be the first instance of truly prosocial behavior. That is, the child's aim is to relieve the other's distress -- even though his behavior will often be misguided owing to its being based on the assumption of identity between his own and the other person's inner states.

At the next developmental level of interest the child knows that the other's inner states are different from his own, that he has a different perspective based on his own needs and interpretations of events, although he is uncertain as to what that perspective is. This is largely the result of the child's cognitive development, together with experiences in which his expectations based on projection have proven to be wrong. His efforts to help now become more sophisticated. Consider this example. A boy struggles with a friend over a toy. The friend cries. The boy pauses, lets go so that the friend has the toy, but the friend keeps crying. The boy gives the friend his Teddy, but the friend keeps crying. The boy then runs to the next room, gets the friend's security blanket, and offers it to the friend, who then stops crying.

This type of response is obviously less primitive than the previous ones. The affective portion may still be similar, to be sure, and the child very likely continues to project his own needs to the victim. He is aware of the guesswork involved, however, and tries to use his knowledge about the other, as well as benefit from corrective feedback received in the situation. The projected content is just one of many inputs contributing to his response. For the first time in our developmental account the child makes active cognitive inferences about the other person's inner states. He tries, in Piaget's sense, to "construct" the other; to put himself in the other's place; to take his role.

At a still more advanced point the child becomes not only aware of the other's inner states but of his separate existence beyond the immediate situation. He is then capable of responding to the other's <u>general</u> state or plight. This third level of sympathetic distress, then, consists of a synthesis of the empathic distress reaction to the other's feeling in the immediate situation, and a more active cognitive construction of the other's general level of misfortune. Further, if the cues of the immediate and the general are contradictory, the individual has the capacity to rise above and resist the pull of the immediate and respond primarily to what he imagines are the other's general life conditions and prospects -- his general level of deprivation or fulfillment. If this image diverges from his conception of an acceptable normal

happy existence, a conception which he has also acquired by this time, he responds with sympathetic distress.

In a final cognitive extension the individual acquires the capacity to comprehend the plight not only of one person but entire groups or classes of people -- such as those who are economically impoverished, politically oppressed, socially outcast, victimized by war, or mentally retarded. He may not have had any distress experiences quite like those of the victimized group, but it seems reasonable to assume that he has had his difficult moments and that all painful experiences have some affective aspects in common -- therefore that he has the affective base for a generalized empathic distress response. The synthesis of this generalized empathic distress with the awareness of the plight of an unfortunate group constitutes this final level of sympathetic distress.

Thus far I have mentioned nothing about the individual's perception of himself as the cause of the other's distress or misfortune. This becomes a possibility once he acquires the capacity to recognize the consequences of his own action for others and the fact that he has choice over his behavior. The synthesis of sympathetic distress and awareness of being the cause of the other's distress is what I call guilt, since it has both the affectively unpleasant and the cognitive self-blaming components of the guilt experience. Personal guilt may be experienced directly as the result of specific acts of commission, or of omission -- things he might have done to help the other but didn't.

The person may also feel culpable not because of any specific action or inaction but because of his sheer existence in a relatively advantaged position with respect to others. While one's relative advantage may be a necessary condition for sympathetic distress -- since preoccupation with one's own troubles may prevent having feeling for the other -- it may at times become salient, and the primary basis for what I shall call existential guilt. The individual is consumed with the fact that he is enjoying what others cannot; or that others suffer misfortunes that he does not -- a recognition difficult to avoid in an age of mass communications. An obvious example exists among today's affluent American youth where additional contributing factors to existential guilt are the prevalent acceptance of equalitarian social norms --

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all people have equal worth -- and a lack of justification for their own relative advantage since it was inherited not earned. For some, existential guilt can shade into an exquisite form of personal guilt -- a "sense of individual complicity" -- should they gain an understanding of the larger matrix of social forces and social causation which enables them to see the contribution of their own reference group to the plight of the victimized groups. This may be a far more powerful motivating force than the simpler form of personal guilt mentioned earlier, since it may call for ceaseless activity in the service of social change rather than a discrete act of restitution. If I am right about this, we may have to add something to Maslow's need hierarchy. Though an individual's deficiency needs are satisfied, the person may not be able to search for fulfillment when the deficiency needs of large groups of others in society remain unsatisfied.

In discussing the development of the white-middle-class radicals of the 1960's, Keniston very neatly captures the essence of the existential guilt response (although he does not call it "guilt") and the role of seeing oneself as relatively advantaged, when he states that they

> "....stressed their shock upon realizing that their own good fortune was not shared....and their indignation when they 'really' understood that the benefits they had experienced had not been extended to others." (pp. 131-132)

Perhaps the following quotes, one from a Keniston interviewee and the other from a college student working in the summer as an "intern" for U.S. Representative Morriss Udall, illustrate even more sharply the potentially important role of the perception of relative advantage in motivating prosocial behavior,

> "It seemed to me completely obvious that these kids were smarter than I was, they were quicker, they were faster, they were stronger, they knew more about things. And yet, you know, I was the one that lived in a place where there were fans and no flies, and they lived with the flies. And I was clearly destined for something, and they were destined for nothing....Well, I sort of made a pact with these people that when I got to be powerful I might change some things. And I think I pursued that pact pretty consistently for a long time.'" (p. 50)

> "....these people feel guilty that they have had the highest standard of living ever. They feel guilty because while they are enjoying

> this highest standard of living, American Indians are starving and black ghettos are overrun by rats. What they see is that in America, home of that "glorious dream," all sorts of people are starving. This goes on while they eat steak every day. Their sense of moral indignation can't stand this; and they realize that the blame rests on the shoulders of their class." (The New Republic, Nov. 29, 1970, p. 11)

The concept of existential guilt also encompasses the survivor guilt found in wartime and so well documented by Robert Lifton in his study of the survivors of Hiroshima. Despite being maimed, disfigured, and at times half dead themselves. these people felt guilty because they lived and others had died. Lifton suggests that

> "....survivor can never, inwardly, simply conclude that it was logical and right for him, and not others, to survive. Rather he is bound by an unconscious perception of organic social balance which makes him feel that his surviving was made possible by others' deaths: If they had not died, he would have had to; if he had not survived, someone else would have. Such guilt .... may well be that most fundamental to human existence." (p. 56)

In discussing the idea of "radiation of guilt" Lifton highlights the significance of the sense of relative advantage,

> "....the survivors feel guilt toward the dead; ordinary Japanese feel guilt toward survivors; and the rest of the world feels guilt toward the Japanese. Proceeding outward from the core of the death immersion each group internalizes the suffering of that one step closer than itself to the core which it contrasts with its own relative good fortune. However invisible these patterns may be at the periphery, they can be observed in the behavior of the members of one group toward those of another...." (p. 499)

Lifton also confirms the connection between existential guilt and action when he states that many of the survivors, though themselves maimed and having barely enough strength to save themselves and their families, "felt accused in the eyes of the anonymous dead and dying of wrongdoing and transgression for not helping them, letting them die....for selfishinly remaining alive and strong (p. 36)". That even under these extreme conditons existential guilt could function as a motive to prosocial action -- in this case, praying for the souls of the dead -- is illustrated by the survivor who said,

> "In the midst of the disaster I tried to read Buddhist scriptures continuously for about a week, hoping that my effort would contribute something to the happiness of the dead. It was not exactly a sense of responsibility or anything as clear as that. It was a vague feeling

> -- I felt sorry for the dead because they died and I survived. I wanted to pacify the spirits of the ead.... in Buddhism we say that the souls wander about in anxiety, and if we read the scriptures to them, they lose their anxiety and start to become easy and settle down. So I felt that if I read the scriptures, I could give some comfort to the souls of those who had departed." (p. 375)

I would submit that the three types of sympathetic distress are potential bases for altruistic behavior -- which I am defining as behavior aimed at helping others in distress-- and the two types of guilt, for reparative behavior. When confronted with others in distress the individual experiences one or another type of sympathetic distress -- or guilt if he feels responsible for the distress -- which predisposes him toward behavior designed to alleviate the other's distress or to make amends for damage he may have done. Whether or not the behavior is actually exhibited depends on the strength of these motives, which is a function of the individual's prior socialization experiences, and the strength of competing motives aroused in the situation. The initial response tendency is to act -- either altruistically or reparatively as called for; and in the absence of action, for whatever reason, I would expect the person either to continue to experience the distress or the guilt, or to restructure cognitively the situation so as to justify inaction, for example, by finding something in the situation to justify or deny his relative advantage, attribute motivation to the other which is consonant with his circumstances, or attribute blame to some other agent.

In this connection, Lois Murphy, in her study of sympathy in preschool children of forty years ago, reported that the child's most natural response was to help the other child in distress and that if he couldn't do this his affective response was prolonged. We found something similar in fifth and seventh grade children's completions of stories in which the central figure commits a transgression. The vast majority of the completions involved guilt, and most of these also included some form of reparative behavior when this was permitted by the story conditions. When reparation was impossible the guilt response was more prolonged and intense. The relation between guilt and action is also shown in several recently published studies in which college students in whom guilt had been induced experimentally engaged in various prosocial acts like volunteering to be subjects in other research and

donating blood, to a greater degree than the control subjects. Finally, the motivational properties of witnessing others in distress have been shown by Tilker, who found that college students exposed to pain cues of the victim in a Milgram-type experiment were often impelled to interrupt the experiment. And by Berger and Di Lolli, also in a shock experiment, who found the victim's distress cues led to decreased reaction time by the subject.

Clearly I have not dealt with the full range of moral -- or even prosocial behavior -- but only two aspects of it: the response to a person in distress when one has not been, and when one has been, the cause of that distress. The first is the essential condition that calls for altruism and second, for reparation or restitution.